

The Pervasiveness of Loss by mercyme

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Fix-it fic, M/M, Original Character Death(s), Road Trip, The one where Billy breaks the chain of abuse and apologizes, tw: abuse

Language: English

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Character Development, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-04

Updated: 2017-11-04

Packaged: 2022-04-02 14:36:49

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,024

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Billy makes a list. Steve helps him finish it.

The Pervasiveness of Loss

"They want you to love the whole damn world but you won't, you want it all narrowed down to one fleshy man in the bath, who knows what to do with his body, with his hands."

-Richard Siken, *Driving, Not Washing*

He's born William Hargrove, eight pounds and eight ounces. Before his first birthday, the pageantry is dropped and he's just "Bill". He stays Bill for years, right up until his mother dies.

"It's just you and me now," his father says, lines carved hard into the edges of his mouth.

Bill. That's what his mother called him. She's gone now so whoever Bill was or could have been is gone, too. Billy is eleven years old and he knows that once people die they're gone forever. He's smart enough to know that it's not always in this way, not always to the smell of gasoline, to bodies hurled down the freeway, and cars wrapped around trees, as though unaware that metal isn't meant to bend.

At the funeral, Billy smokes his first cigarette to mask the bile seeping into his mouth at the sight of her closed coffin. He sits on the ground outside of the funeral home, decorative rocks digging into his skin. He has this sense of being smothered. Billy has felt this way before, swimming to the surface of a pool, seeing the light, lungs burning, the surface never coming.

It's a close approximation to a normal Thursday afternoon when Billy fully understands his mom's bruises.

Since his mom died, Billy hasn't stopped thinking about her, not really. With his father's hand wrapped around his throat, he feels almost as though he *is* her. He remembers crashes, thumps, and the

wall above his headboard shaking when his parents fought. Now he's taken her place; they share this now. Billy learns that pain can bridge death.

"You're going to have to do better, boy," his father tells him, voice low, "Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Billy rasps. He can feel the blood pounding in his face. There are spots in his vision, black holes tearing into the room around him.

"Yes, what?"

Billy can't remember what he did. It must have been bad, like leaving his bicycle in the drive way or not doing his chores well enough; he won't do it again. He won't, he'll do *better*-

"Yes, sir."

After his father would beat her, his mom would load Billy up in her car and they would drive fast, racing up against the sunset. Her hands would shake around her cigarettes. There is no such thing as "doing better", he learns. This is not something he will outgrow. Billy lies about the parts of him pushed against walls, held taut between hands the size of his head, and stung with a staccato of slaps.

Did his mom ever deserve it like he did? He can't imagine that she was ever as rotten as him.

After his basketball team takes state, the team captain, Jake, strong-arms Billy into his truck as soon as the rest of the team is out of sight. He and Billy spend the night at the outskirts of town.

It's a revelation, having sex like this with Jake. Billy feels fucked out and exhausted in the bed of his truck. Jake growls low in his throat as Billy mouths at the curve of his neck.

"Again?" he murmurs.

Billy groans, but he doesn't swat Jake's hands away, and Jake continues with slow, careful touches, sliding his fingers and lips

across the landscape of Billy's body, learning every inch of it. Billy arches beneath his touch, mouth opening in a silent gasp as Jake's tongue trails down the notches of his spine, and then lower, mapping the curve of Billy's ass.

"You're a fucking tease..." he huffs, lifting his hips off the truck bed in a wordless plea. Billy is still loose and open, slick from before, and Jake slides two fingers into him, pressing deep enough to scrape his fingers just there and watch Billy's entire body tense up and writhe with want.

At eighteen, it's easy for Billy to sneak out. He climbs into Jake's truck as the wind picks up, his smile cautious yet open in the flickering light of the street lamps. Billy has never longed for danger, just a coping mechanism capable of reaching his bones. Something that can wash him out entirely, sturdy and unbreakable. The way Jake's body slams into him takes it all away. His broad back is a firm anchor; his wide hands never hurt.

Billy knows that what they have is wrong in the eyes of most (all) of the adults in his life, that his father would rather have a dead son than a queer one. He and Jake have edged around the borders of it before, carving out a tentative landscape where it's not the two of them that're wrong, but the rest of the world. They inhabit this in-between space, always on the same bumpy road. They keep having the same conversations under the eye of the same moon, hanging like a silent sentinel in the sky.

"After we graduate, I'm moving to the Castro District in San Francisco. I'll get a place, get a job-I'll call you every week," Jake whispers into his skin, inhales the smell of his hair. Jake thinks mullets are hot so Billy is growing one out.

"You'll forget me," Billy responds, a familiar fear settling into the center of his chest. He would be stuck here. That same feeling of suffocation. Jake leans back and catches Billy's face between his hands.

"Then don't let me. Come with," Jake pleads. There is excitement in his eyes. Billy kisses him until Jake's forgotten what they're talking about. They fuck on the ground, Billy rough with desperation, biting

Jake's jaw and sucking kisses down his throat. Later, Billy marvels at the not-quite bruises on his hips. He places Jake's hands over them against Jake's protests. Jake thinks they're sexy, that there is something primal and sensual in the marks.

During the day, Jake, Billy, and their friends practice basketball. They go on dates with girls from their classes, and lift weights to Metallica's new album. On the rare occasion that Billy's home, his father reminds him of what he's running away from. Billy gives the moments in between to Jake.

A few weeks later, Jake is found dead in a dumpster behind a broken-down arcade. "Fag" is spray painted across the dumpster.

Billy and his family move to Hawkins, Indiana.

They don't talk about it, which suits Billy just fine. He doesn't want to talk about it, about how he woke up and Jake was dead and gone, and how half the school blamed him for it, his step sister, Max, included. He wonders if his father did it, if Max tipped him off and that was all it took. Probably not, Billy thinks, because then he would be dead, too.

There is a world where things went differently, where he and Jake fled across America and figured out the details later. Where the bullet missed or was never fired. Billy hates the world that he lives in for not being that one. He hates the world with Hawkins, Indiana in it.

"That's Steve Harrington."

Billy snaps his gaze away from the guy slipping off a Member's Only jacket across the basketball court, "What?"

"The prep you're staring at," one of his new-found friends says, "He's like the king of Hawkins High."

"That doesn't amount to much now, does it?"

“He can hold his own around a keg,” his friend shrugs, bouncing his basketball impatiently.

Almost every morning, Billy wakes up and he doesn’t want anything, can hardly do anything, and has to anyway. The pain is different than when he lost his mom, different from the beatings, but he keeps it a secret all the same. He has a short list of things that help: weed, alcohol, sex, and working out. Many of Hawkins’ locals have similar interests but none of them have caught his eye like Steve.

“Let’s see how good this king really is, huh?” Billy asks, pulling his shirt over his head.

When he and Steve Harrington face off on the court, he’s disappointed. Harrington is a decent player, but not as good as Billy. His hair bounces ludicrously when he runs, his legs are blindingly pale, and it’s extraordinarily easy to fluster him. In other words, he’s nothing like Jake.

Billy doesn’t put too much thought into why he’s so desperate to draw a comparison between the two of them.

Gravity is sucking him into the ground. His vision is blurs. Max is above him. His step-sister. Her hair looks especially orange, like flames. She is standing above him, having just slammed a baseball bat covered in nails between his legs.

She wants him to leave her friends alone. To leave her alone. Does he understand? Does he understand?

Better question: When did he become his dad?

Since his mom died, there has been something underneath Billy’s skin building, trying to get his attention. It splintered and grew, shards of glass breaking through his skin and cutting those around him.

“Just because your dad hits you doesn’t mean you can hit everyone else,” Steve snaps. His face has taken on the greenish-yellow hue of healing bruises. It’s been less than a week since he gave the bruises to Steve and they’re healing nicely, at least in comparison to the rate Billy heals at.

Billy works his jaw, dropping his gaze to the Nike Cortez’s that Steve is wearing to avoid adding another bruise to his face. He says, “Well when you put it *that* way.”

Steve shrugs an expansive what-should-I-have-expected shrug, and asks, “So, who else is on your list?”

“List?”

“I figured I was merely one name of many on your ‘People I Need to Apologize to’ list.”

Billy tsks, grinding his cigarette butt into the ground, “I don’t have a fucking list, okay.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Any other requests, Harrington?” Billy asks but he brushes past him before Steve can respond.

Billy’s list, as it turns out, is long. It jumps from Max’s new boyfriend, Lucas, to Max, herself. A classmate he almost fought at a party last week, that teacher he told to shut the fuck up, and his step mom, Susan. He leaves off his dad and scrawls down the rest of Max’s nerdy friends. He feels sick to his stomach when he finishes, name after name scrawled messily on nearly every line of the wide-ruled paper. After a moment’s hesitation, he writes, “*Jake*” at the bottom.

“Who’s Jake?” Harrington asks, scanning the list the next day. Billy is leaning on the locker adjacent to Steve’s. Someone’s hovering nearby, too intimidated by whoever the fuck they think Billy is to ask him to move.

“My ex-boyfriend,” Billy replies blithely. He knows Steve won’t believe him and isn’t shocked when he shoves Billy’s list into his chest, slamming his locker shut

“Do you think you could work on not being such an asshole, too?”

Anger still rises in him. His car races down backroads. The skin on his cheeks, neck, arms, and stomach blossom purple and red. It happens over and over again. He goes to the school counselor because he hates his dad, wants to be nothing like his dad, but nothing changes. The entire town is holding their breath, waiting for the day when his father goes too far. No one gives a fuck about him. It's night, noon, early in the morning. Over and over.

The school counselor gives him a pamphlet. It's bright orange and the front panel reads: “Controlling Anger Before It Controls You”.

There was a time when his cracked knuckles, the smell of blood, and broken glass protected him.

The counselor says, *“We’re going to work on positive outlets for your stress and anger”, “What are some qualities about yourself that you really enjoy?”, “Have you heard of deep breathing exercises?”, and “Let’s identify possible solutions to scenarios in your life that elicit an anger response.”*

One possible solution is cutting off his hair in the restroom of a random gas station. He could change his name. He could be someone better, someone who doesn't lash out or yell or feel threatened to some degree by nearly every person in his life. Billy could run away.

Before Billy leaves, the counselor says, “Remember: it's okay to let it go. All of the things that make you mad, that weigh you down-you don't have to own them.”

It becomes his prayer of going nowhere.

“Look, I'm sorry. Pushing you up against that wall was fucked up.”

Lucas' eyes are comically wide. He's gripping his notebooks so hard that the covers are warping under his fingers.

“You’re telling me that you just want to say that you’re sorry? Did someone put you up to this?”

“I’m working on being less of an ass, okay?”

Lucas relaxes minutely, crossing a boundary into skepticism, “And you’re not gonna hurt Max?”

“Nope.”

“You promise?”

“Yup.”

“I still think you’re a total dick,” Lucas responds and runs. When he’s a safe distance, he calls out, “I’m keeping my eye on you!”

The remainder of Billy’s list more or less follows this framework.

“You kept your footing today,” Billy says, blinking through the mist of the locker room showers. He brushes his hair off of his forehead and pushes his face into the stream of water.

“I’m honored by the observation,” Steve says. Billy notices his gaze catch on his bicep.

“You know what I meant,” He says, hating the tension building in his stomach. Billy didn’t mean for it to happen. He has a type. Steve isn’t it. But there’s something about him, a protectiveness and a flash of a smile and the way he looks at him, as though Steve can see through his bullshit. It draws him in like a magnet and pisses him off at the same time.

“I guess we all can’t be naturally gifted.” Steve says sarcastically, allowing himself a small smile as he twists off the water valve and wraps a towel around his waist.

Billy glances down at his dick (flaccid, thank god) and back up at Steve, quirked an eyebrow, “Kind of you to say so.”

A blush rises across Steve's chest and cheeks. He jerks his head to the ceiling as if to make a point and bites out, "You know what I meant."

Billy lobs a wink at Steve and says, "Holler if you ever want a closer look."

It's only when Steve is lacing up his shoes, almost fully dressed and ready to leave when Billy forces himself to say, "I finished my list."

"What list?" Steve pauses, glancing up at him.

"You know," Billy says as casually as he can, toweling off his hair, "The apology list. The one you made me write."

Steve rolls his eyes, "Does anyone make you do anything?"

"I still have one name left." Billy ventures, unsure of what he wants from Steve at this point, willing to take anything outside of a concrete "no". Steve's blatantly lost, having given up on tying his shoe altogether to stare blankly at Billy.

"Do you want to take a trip to Cali with me?"

He stuffs a week's worth of clothes into a duffel bag and grabs the old jar of coffee grounds from the top shelf of his family's pantry, pocketing a roll of cash from inside it. Max watches him silently from the kitchen door in a flannel nightgown that reaches her ankles. Her hair is a mess.

"Are you going to go apologize to that boy you killed?" she asks.

Billy raises a hand to his face, tucking his hair behind his ears. The sun is beginning to rise but it's still dim in the kitchen. Lately he's felt like the glass shards underneath his skin are fusing back together. It's a fragile mend. He swallows hard.

"You don't know about this, okay? If my dad asks, just tell him I fucked off on my own and you had nothing to do with it." he points at Max and immediately feels like he has no right to. Billy drops his hand.

"Know about what?" she responds mildly.

"You're not so bad, you know that?"

"I wish I could say the same," she says, the vaguest air of sardonicism to her tone. He takes it as a good sign—he's begun operating under the assumption that things will get better if he belligerently believes they will. Billy's good at belligerent.

"I'm working on it."

"We'll see."

Billy catches Max's eye on the way out. There's an unyielding quality to her. Billy hopes that it never breaks; he's glad that he never broke it.

"You'll be okay by yourself?"

"Duh," She scoffs, pushing off the wall and shuffling down the long hallway to her room.

He finds Steve where he said he'd be, slouching on the hood of the BMW, a bulging gym bag on the ground before him. He has dark rings below his eyes and perfectly coiffed hair. At the sound of Billy's car rolling down Steve's driveway, his head jerks up. He's wearing a small smile. Anxiety spikes in Billy's chest.

"Need a ride?" Billy asks, swallowing his trepidation. He reaches across the car and unlocks the passenger side door.

Steve opens wounds that Billy had meant to hide away for the rest of his life. He should have known better than to think Steve would let him off easy; he'd be angry, wary of it, but that's not the kind of person he wants to be anymore. It frightens him to admit to himself how tired he is of that person, how willing he is to let go of everything that he thought could keep him safe before.

"You've changed," Steve observes. Billy glances over but Steve's completely unreadable when he wears those stupid, preppy Ray Bans.

"In a good way?" Billy asks instead, shifting his hands on the steering wheel. The radio has been nothing but static for almost the entirety of the corn field they've been driving through. It's a big corn field.

Steve makes a considering noise, lowering his sunglasses to peek over them. Around laughter, he says, "You're still an ass hole, just not a terrible one."

"Shut up," Billy says but he finds that he's smiling.

The night they're passing through New Mexico, Billy and Steve take an exit off of the I-40 W and lie side by side on the hood of Billy's car. The sky is purple and wide open. It's early enough in the spring for the air to hold a memory of the cold. Billy can feel the warmth radiating from Steve's body where their arms nearly touch.

He's stares at a satellite in the sky until it passes out of his vision. Without turning his head, he takes a long drag of his joint and says, "Thanks."

From his peripherals, he sees Steve roll to face him, "For what?"

Billy can't force himself to meet Steve's eyes. There's a million things he could say: *"Thanks for still talking to me after I beat you up like a total psychopath"* or *"For being the closest thing to a friend that I have right now and helping me through my shittiest life choices to date."* He searches the sky for another satellite and says, "For coming with me to apologize to the last name on my list."

"I only came to see some giant balls of yarn," Steve says, snorting when Billy nudges him. Then he goes silent. Billy forgets they were talking by the time Steve asks, "Is Jake really your ex-boyfriend?"

"Yeah, he was." Billy figures he doesn't have much to lose at this point. He passes the joint to Steve and it glows red at the tip as he takes a hit.

"Was?"

"He's dead."

“Did you...was it because of you? I mean, is that why you're apologizing?”

“No,” Billy says and rolls off the hood of the car, “Someone in town didn't like that he was queer but it wasn't me.”

“Oh.” Steve doesn't comment on how tense Billy is on the drive to the nearest shitty motel. They don't speak again until morning.

When they pass through Arizona, they detour to see the Grand Canyon. Steve runs up to the edge of the rim from the parking lot, his hair whipping in the wind. He swings his arms wide open and shouts in amazement.

“I can't believe you're so impressed with a giant hole in the ground,” Billy drawls around a lump in his throat.

Steve turns to him with a private smile. The edges of his eyes are crinkling, like he is amused at something that Billy is unaware of, “Don't make me push you in.”

The weight of California bears down on Billy as soon as they cross the border.

This entire endeavor was a stupid idea. He takes the nearest exit and pulls off to the side of the road, gravel crunching below his tires. Billy presses his forehead into the wheel until it almost hurts. This isn't going to change anything.

“I don't want to do this,” he says softly, eyes carefully trained on nothing but the blurred, black wheel in front of his face.

“Tough shit. We drove for three days to get here.”

“What the fuck even is this, y'know? What are we doing?”

Spending three days on the road with Steve has given Billy an unadulterated glimpse into his idiosyncrasies. Steve's a good dancer

and a fucking tragic drunk. For as popular as he had seemed back in Hawkins, he's largely unconcerned with the opinions of other people. He complains if he doesn't get to stop at the odd, roadside attraction miles out of the way and grumbles in a mumbled sleep-language if Billy plays the music too loud while he's napping. Steve has the habit of parenting himself and, on increasingly frequent and annoying occasions, Billy. Perhaps most importantly, Steve has never raised a hand to him, even when Billy fucks up or freaks out or pulls to the side of the road to embark on a panic attack.

"Well," Steve says, "I'm going on a road trip to get a break from...Hawkins."-he doesn't say "Nancy Wheeler" and who the fuck does he think he's kidding?-"And you're getting closure and processing your feelings like an adult for maybe the first time ever."

Billy wonders what Steve has gleaned from him in the past few days. If he sees someone redeemable or the same, abusive psychopath that laughed as Steve beat his face in. They sit for a moment listening to the car idling, then Billy feels Steve card a hand through his curls.

"Drive," he commands.

When they come to a stop in the cemetery parking lot, Billy doesn't move. He can't. Steve goes so far as to walk to his side of the car, open the door, and crouch down, hands on his knees, to look directly into Billy's eyes, "Showtime, Billy."

"I don't even know what to say," Billy says, blood pounding in his ears.

"This is for an apology list, isn't it? Start with 'I'm sorry'."

Billy takes a steadying breath and they walk together through the rows of tombstones. Some have fake flower displays while others have none; some are ornate statues of angels and others are rectangular slabs. Then they get to Jake's.

"Hi Jake," he says, then turns away from Steve, embarrassed. Steve can take a hint and fucks off to wander through the other hundreds of tombstones, likely avoiding thoughts on the corpses below his feet.

"Hi Jake," Billy tries again, "It's been a while. I could have come here sooner, I guess. And brought something when I came. Flowers, maybe," He looks down at his feet and scuffs the edge of his shoes against the ground, "It's stupid to say this to a tombstone but I'm sorry. Like that we never went on a real date and for all of the times that I was a dick or that I didn't say I love you because I was...scared. I'm sorry that we'll never live in San Francisco," He clears his throat wetly, dropping to his knees by the tombstone, "I'm sorry, too, that I never got to say good bye. I'm sorry that I turned into an asshole after you died. And that, of the two of us, it was...it was you that died, and not me. I think the world may have been -"

"C'mon, Billy. Don't ruin a perfectly good apology with self-pity."

Billy turns and looks up at Steve; he knows there's something broken in his expression. Steve brushes his fingertips across his forehead. He leans into the touch. For a moment, Billy feels like he's about to cry. He's crumbling under the weight of something bigger than himself.

"It's okay," Steve says, fingers still pressed against the side of his face. Billy's lips quiver as he tries not to weep.

"If you want to give one last apology," Steve says, stepping back, "I think I found where they buried your mom."

They walk to his mom's grave. It's not too far away from Jake's and that makes Billy feel good for some reason. They stare at it for a minute in silence.

"It's okay," Steve says again, quiet. Billy looks to him, questioning, "To cry, that is. This is sad, you're supposed to cry."

Billy tries not to, but he does. He begins crying for his mother, for the crash that took her away. Then he cries for the shake in her hands as she drove fast toward the horizon, for the abuse she sustained from his father, and for how little he's visited her. He sobs, "*I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry*", burying his face into the space between Steve's shoulder and his neck, sobbing harder when Steve wraps his arms around him tightly. His entire body shakes as he cries for the shitty role he's had in so many people's lives. Billy momentarily remembers what Steve said, about ruining a good apology with self-pity.

"I'm sorry that I haven't been a good person," he whispers when he can say it without blubbering, "But I'm trying to be one now."

They stop by the beach before heading back because Steve doesn't know the next time he'll be on the west coast. Everyone is tan and attractive and look, frankly, a lot like Billy.

"You know, I've thought about it before," Steve says suddenly and Billy jerks, nearly swerving into traffic.

"Jesus *fuck*-I thought you were asleep!"

"I'm being serious," Steve says, pushing his face against the cool, car window. Billy can see Steve's blurred reflection in the glass.

"About what?"

"Being gay. Or bisexual, I guess," he says in a rush.

"Thoughts about being gay in general or," Billy lowers his voice, fully aware that doing so in a car careening 70 mph down the highway is completely unnecessary and stupid, "or about *you* being gay?"

"Bisexual," Steve corrects.

"Right, sorry. Bisexual. What kind of thoughts?"

"Just thoughts, I guess. Nothing out of the ordinary," he says, clearing his throat.

Something in Billy's chest sparks.

"I'm happy that I came," Steve says the next day, voice running right up against the border of too casual. They're sitting across from one another in a greasy spoon. It's terribly hot and the sweat on Billy's back has begun bleeding through his shirt. Steve's hair is deflating.

They sit and look out the window together as Frank Sinatra sings "Luck Be a Lady" through the cheap speakers.

When they roll back into Hawkins, it hits Billy that returning home after a week of absence is a fucking stupid move.

Billy pulls into the Harrington driveway. It's empty save for Steve's car.

"Well, this is me," Steve says, grabbing his duffle bag.

"I'll see ya around," Billy says distractedly. He has no clue where they stand, if this is going to be a Breakfast Club situation where nothing's changed come Monday morning. If it was all in his head.

"Uh, thanks for bringing me," Steve says, "It was good for me, too."

He looks surprised that he means it. Billy's not that offended.

Just as Steve is exiting the car, Billy says, "Wait."

Steve turns, patient as ever, his hand resting on the hood of his car. His t-shirt is taut across his chest and some of his hair is hanging in his face.

"Nevermind," Billy says. Steve moves to shut the door and Billy shouts, "I really like you!"

He hears Steve yell, "What!?" but by then Billy's peeling out of the driveway, kicking up rocks as he speeds home under the roar of his engine.

"Thanks for covering for me. You didn't have to," Billy is banging around in the fridge, looking for something to cook for dinner. Omelets again.

"I know I didn't," she says simply, "But you owe me one now so it's worth it."

“That so?” He cracks the rest of the eggs from the carton into the skillet and glances at her over his shoulder. Max is sitting at the dinner table, rolling a baseball between her hands. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Yeah,” she says, “Like, if I wanted to go to the AV club meeting after school, you’d wait and give me a ride home after.”

Billy indiscriminately pulls food from the fridge and adds them to the omelets. Questionable mushrooms, half of a tomato from dinner two nights ago, some turkey sandwich meat. He feels good.

“God, you’re such a nerd.”

“You don’t even know what ‘AV’ stands for!”

That shocks a laugh out of him. “Fair enough,” he says. He cracks open a beer and flips the omelets.

After dinner, they wash the dishes together to make sure they’re done by the time his father gets home.

“Just tell me when it is and I’ll wait,” Billy says, “Your AB club or whatever.”

At school, Steve lingers by his locker. He drives his BMW down the road to Billy’s house. By Thursday, Steve stops attempting to contact him, perhaps waiting for Billy to make the first move.

Billy doesn’t.

On the drive home, Max mentions that Steve’s been helping her group of nerd friends out a lot lately, that she saw him hanging out with Nancy and Jonathon at Mike’s house. Billy doesn’t know how he feels about that and he ends up very trashed at a bonfire the next night. When he locates a phone in the kitchen, he dials Steve’s number with clumsy fingers.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Steve sounds wide awake for two in the morning. It’s impressive. Billy’s impressed.

“Well, you know, fucking and sucking is a full-time occupation and I-”

“For the record, I hate that I’m sober right now,” Steve interrupts bitterly. Billy wonders if he can hear the throb of the music in the background, the shouted half-conversations.

“Are you at Ed’s party?” something about the contemplation in his tone makes Billy perk up. He hazards a glance around the kitchen, pressing the phone closer to his mouth.

“Are you alone in that big house, Steve?”

Steve sighs and says, “Almost always.”

“Are you lonely?” Billy almost purrs.

Steve utters a short laugh, “Me? Never.”

“Come party, Steve,” Billy says, then someone’s pressing a cold can of beer into his hands and pulling him back out into the night, into the throng of dancers on the back porch.

The bonfire burns to look at. He lolls his head back to stare at the sky, focusing on the heat radiating onto his exposed chest. A solid buzz roars through his body as the most recent beers he chugged begin to knock on the inside of his skull.

“Jesus,” Steve says. Billy knows it’s Steve.

“Billy, you know it’s like forty degrees outside.”

It’s him.

Billy stares up at Steve from where his head rests (incapable of much else) on his shoulder. Steve is more shadow than person, outlined by a corona of orange-white light from the fire.

“Steve,” he acknowledges, not caring how pleased it comes out, how child-like.

“Your shirt is completely unbuttoned. It’s forty degrees out. And everyone’s either gone inside or left,” Steve continues, resigned. He might as well be talking to himself.

“Have a seat,” Billy says, heavily patting the log he’s sprawled across. He hums happily when Steve does. The cold is wafting off of him in waves and Billy takes the excuse to drape a companionable arm across his shoulders. He doesn’t move away so Billy leans into it a bit, greedy to memorize the feeling.

“You’re, like, the only good thing about this town, did you know that?”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“No, ‘m serious,” Billy presses, squeezing Steve tightly, “Everything else is fucking stupid. But not...you’re not.”

Steve ducks out from under Billy’s arm, “Okay Hargrove. That’s enough partying for one night, don’t you think?”

When Steve opens the door, Billy experiences a moment of lucidity where he realizes that Steve’s brought him to his own house, not Billy’s. However, the lucidity is fleeting and Billy’s not sure what to make of it, anyway. He zeroes in on the couch, flops onto it, and stays there. His feet hang off the end.

“Can I sleep here?” Billy asks, face pushed into the cushions.

“Sure, don’t mind me,” Steve says and he throws a blanket at Billy on the way to his room.

The next morning Steve walks into his living room and finds Billy still on the couch. His shirt is open and one of his nipples is clearly visible. Billy stretches, arching his back off of the cushions, “Hello, sunshine,” he says, voice thick with sleep and cigarettes.

“Hey yourself,” he says, and it comes out harsher than he means it.

Billy sits up. One side of his mullet is pressed into the side of his head. “Thanks for letting me crash on your couch.”

"What're friends for?"

Billy quirks an eyebrow, watching Steve intently, "Friends?"

"Don't push it," Steve says stubbornly, and then, "Why've you been avoiding me?"

Billy rocks back into the couch heavily, deliberating. Two courses of action run up to their ends in his head. Fuck it, he'll never be the type to weigh his options carefully.

"Because I don't want to be friends." Billy says simply, worrying his bottom lip, willing Steve to see the writing on the wall.

He does.

Steve straddles his lap and Billy luxuriates in the newfound weight on his lap. He gets lost in the inches separating them and nearly gasps when Steve leans forward and brushes his lips once across Billy's, careful and chaste and all wrong.

"You're so fucking pretty, you know that?" Billy asks, his voice low. He leans into the space between them, lazily kissing away the hitch in Steve's breath. Steve follows when Billy lays them down, their legs slotting together. His hips surge against Billy's and he moans openly from the back of his throat.

"That's it," Billy coaxes, nipping at Steve's ear, sucking lightly at his neck.

The garage door starts to open.

"Shit," Steve says, sitting up and summarily dumping Billy onto the ground, "My parents are home."

"Shit," agrees Billy and recovers well for his part. He's on his feet and making for the front door within seconds.

"Wait-" Steve says and Billy looks at him like he's crazy, urgency straining at the edges of his eyes.

"I really like you, too, Billy."

Billy grins at him with all of his teeth, "Meet me tonight? The quarry at 11:00?"

All Steve can do is nod.

Commotion erupts from the garage as the garage door begins to crank closed and car doors swing open. Billy slips out the front door. He's all too practiced at this type of getaway, throwing a guarded look over his shoulder at Steve before running, long-legged and haphazard, to his car. He shifts the car into neutral and rolls it down the street, away from Steve's house.

At around 1 pm, the phone rings from the kitchen. The inside of his head feels like sandpaper but he knows that he needs to answer it before it wakes up his dad. He shambles into the kitchen and plucks the phone from the wall.

"Hargrove's Mortuary," he says smoothly, "You whack 'em, we pack 'em."

"Billy?" Steve's voice comes across the line unamused and unsure.

"Harrington," he responds, heart pounding too fast.

"I'm not going to make it to the quarry tonight."

Billy slots the cord through his fingers, "Oh."

"I was thinking you could come over to mine, instead," Steve says and it throws Billy back to the greasy spoon they stopped at during the road trip, that too-casual tone. When he doesn't respond, Steve continues a little more directly, "My parents had to leave again and I just thought--"

"Okay," Billy says, dazedly setting the handset back onto its housing. He glances at the clock and figures he has a couple of hours to get ready.

After he knocks on his door, it doesn't take long before they're sprawled across Steve's bed. Steve's opening him up cautiously, unsure of his limits. He presses his lube-slicked fingers into Billy, twisting and curling as Billy rocks down onto them, murmuring, "There, like that-good."

Billy shivers and gasps shamelessly, his hand ghosting over his straining erection.

"Don't get started without me," Steve says, blood high in his cheeks. Billy yields so easily, sweeping his hand away to touch absently at Steve's abdomen, instead.

"Please," Billy gasps, eyes glassy.

He breaks on a moan as Steve pushes into him, gasping raggedly, "Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh, *fuck*." Steve thrusts into him and Billy pushes his hips up to meet him, a flush spreading up his chest. Steve winds two hands into Billy's hair, sucking at his neck. It's been too long, Billy realizes. The roll and press of their hips is intoxicating. He adores this, he lives for this. He wants Steve to know, to understand how long he's waited, how much he's wanted. Billy groans again loudly, his mouth opening and his head dropping back against the bed as he writhes on Steve's dick.

Steve hesitates for a moment, running his hands up Billy's sides, pausing to tweak his nipples and wondering at the moan he gets in response.

"Please, yes, more," Billy begs, rocking his hips and biting his lip as he locks eyes with Steve. He takes two of Steve's fingers in his mouth, sucking them as he continues to undulate. Steve's hips snap into him and he moans, torn open and wanting.

"I've got you," Steve says, nipping softly at his throat, arching up to kiss him on his mouth. The angle is good and Billy can't catch his breath, reaching up to jerk himself once, twice-then he's shuddering and spasming on Steve's dick. Steve follows him, pulling out and cumming onto Billy's abdomen. Billy moans again and Steve bends down to catch his mouth in a wet, open-mouthed kiss.

He rolls off and throws an arm over his eyes, "Holy shit."

Billy hangs off the side of Steve's bed for a moment, fishing around in the pocket of his discarded jeans. He feels Steve place a tentative hand on his flank, feeling him.

"Wanna smoke?" Billy asks. He rolls back onto the bed, pressing the length of his body up against Steve's. He pulls a cigarette from the carton and lights it, inhaling deep and passing it to Steve, content to ride out the post-orgasm high before wiping their combined cum from his stomach.

There is a delicacy of complication to Billy that he is still working out. Most days he feels caught between two rooms, not fully one thing or the other, a riotous mixture of hormones and memories and personal truths. He builds on the bad days. He is putting himself together. He's not going back.

—

"I'd like to have a pool." Billy says, "When I have a house."

It's Tuesday, which means Billy has a few hours to kill while Max and her friends play D&D or read technical manuals or save the world at their weekly AV club meeting. He and Steve are sunbathing by his parent's pool.

Steve rolls onto his stomach, wrinkling the towel he's laying on. His bare feet hang over the edge of the pool, toes barely skimming its surface. Rings sparkle out across the water.

"You want a white fence, a dog, and some kids, too?"

"Well, no." Billy says slowly. "Just...I just wanna do alright for myself."

Steve shifts, laying his head in Billy's lap. Billy threads his fingers absently through Steve's hair. The day is warm, but it's not deep enough into the summer to be hot. In a week, they will be graduating high school and Steve will move a few hours away, both for

community college and to distance himself from his father's business. Billy will follow him.

"Will there be room for me in this house?" Steve asks, staring up at him.

He was born William Hargrove and barely remembers his stint as Bill. It's taken time to realize that he has never stopped being any of them; it's taken work to be happy with who he is now.

Billy leans down and chases the warmth on Steve's skin, kissing his cheek, his forehead, his lips. It's funny, after nearly a full year of sporadic counseling sessions and an endless climb to self-betterment, that it's only now, with the possibility fully in his grasp that he trusts it — the feeling that things will be okay, that his future is not marked with the same pain and ugliness of his past.

"There'll always be room for you," he says, and he feels a wild sense of freedom blossom in his chest when Steve kisses him back.

Author's Note:

"every thing that you love, you will eventually lose, but in the end, love will return in a different form."

-May Benatar, [The Pervasiveness of Loss](#).

Thanks for reading!